

The Eyes

Chapter One

The first baby came. Its brown eyes had no pupils, and the irises were twice the normal size, nestled in unusually large eye sockets which appeared slightly more rounded than elliptical. Like egg eyes. Two perspicacious pools of tranquility. The baby did not cry when the doctor slapped his bottom, just peered up at him with his big peculiar eyes, like twin satellite dishes collecting data, and finding the doctor's actions crude, even barbaric. The nurses bathed the baby and swaddled him in a blanket. All routine procedures. But they couldn't hide their gawks for the strange, big-eyed child. In all other respects the baby was normal. But those eyes! They weren't bug eyes, not poppy eyes, just flat brown circumferences of color two sizes larger than the typical human orb, an alien strangeness. He was a baby, yes. But something more. Something different.

Chapter Two

At thirty-four years old, Mary Margaret Brady had never experienced the absurdity of peeing on a pregnancy test strip. Sitting on her toilet- the lid, tank, and base of which were swaddled in a fuzzy pink set from Wal-Mart, she read the directions three times before aiming and squirting. The warm stream of urine hit her wedding ringed hand first, and immediately she repositioned the plastic stick, grimacing at the thought of her own pee touching her clean fingers. She was a big woman, with a soft porpoise-like back. While she peed, she stared across at a variety of fish which adorned her shower curtain and then at some small pretty seashells which decorated the ancient sink. The short pink tentacles of the toilet's terrain rasped at her pale naked flesh (she had just showered), and catching her reflection in the medicine cabinet mirror, she looked to herself like a bloated sea-creature trapped in a tiny aquarium and engaged in some weird underworld ritual.

Downstairs, Mary Margaret's parents, the Davis's, sat in their usual spots, watching TV. William Brady, their son-in-law, a thirty five year old Desert Storm veteran who flew air evacuation missions in a C-130 for two years in 1990 and 1991 in Kuwait, had offered numerous times to replace their old TV with a better set that got more than three channels. But both his mother-in-law, Violet Davis, a sixty-eight year old housewife in the early stages of Alzheimer's, and his father-in-law, Jack Davis, a retired postman, had tersely declined his offer, claiming the one they had worked just fine. Their rowhome on Hickory Avenue was full of sturdy furniture, some manufactured as far back as the 1940's and the 1950's. The mantel was lined with framed photographs of William in his Air Force dress blues, as well as stoic wedding photos from both his and his in-law's marriages. For the past decade of his fifteen year marriage, William suffered with Gulf War Syndrome, and he was still unable to work for any length of time due to chronic fatigue, crippling headaches, and searing muscle pain in both his legs. His thick head of chestnut hair had thinned to the point where he

appeared like a cancer patient mid-way through chemotherapy. Also, rashes, clusters of ugly red bumps, came and went on his pale arms and legs.

With the tips Mary Margaret earned waiting tables at Mike's Place, a local diner, and the older couple's Social Security checks, the family of four scraped by, clipping coupons, buying in bulk at Sam's Club, paying their ground rent yearly (they owned their rowhome), saying grace before every meal, and generally co-existing in a genial contentment.

Mary Margaret prepared most of their meals, since her mother's diagnosis with Alzheimer's several years ago. She enjoyed cooking for her family. Today's lunch, served on TV trays, was sliced chicken breast on seven grain bread, homemade macaroni salad, deviled eggs, and iced tea brewed earlier in a gallon jar which had set out in the backyard on a picnic table in the hot sun for six hours. Jack had a jar of olives, accompanying his sandwich. The briny snack was a favorite of his which he consumed with almost every meal. This earned him the nickname "Mr Olives" from William soon after he and Mary Margaret moved in. In silence, the three enjoyed their meal, lifting their heads only to glance at the TV set. The Price is Right was on.

When Mary Margaret descended the worn carpeted stairs, William reached out and playfully pinched her pillow-y bum. "Grab me a beer, will you, baby?" He didn't notice the high color which stained her cheeks or the diamond glitter of tears in her eyes.

Returning with the Budweiser, she handed it down to him. But when he went to take a sudsy chug from the cold bottle, he got a mouthful of paper. A scroll, like people toss out to sea. Curiously he unfurled it. It read: *Congratulations, Daddy! You are having a baby!* William swallowed once hard, his Adam's apple descending and then rising like the metal striker in the strength test at the fair, which produced a squeal of jubilation from his voice box that almost made his mother in law lose her dentures. For fifteen years, they had been trying to start a family. But the doctors had informed them their chances were small, considering William's debilitating Gulf War Syndrome.

“What in the world?” Violet declared. Her neck was stretched upward like a baby bird waiting for a big fat worm.

“Hell and bells-“ Jack said. Then he placed a juicy olive on his tongue and chewed with relish.

In the doctor’s office six months later, in a paper robe, Mary Margaret lay back on an examining table with her baby bump exposed and slathered with ultra sound gel. William held her hand tightly, as they watched their baby’s sonogram flicker across the screen, like a ragged clump of snow at first. Perspiration and a crown of pustules (the rash was back) ringed William’s forehead, creased with anxiety. He squinted his eyes hard to see. “I think I see two legs-“ he said, as their doctor, a Chinese guy, Doctor Li, swirled his metal apparatus across Mary Margaret’s belly. The doctor’s lips were compressed with intensity, nervous for the jumpy couple and their first born child.

William had conveyed his worry to their doctor that the child might suffer some deformity as a result of his illness. Researching on the internet, he read numerous stories of children born to Desert Storm vets suffering severe malformations from their parent’s exposure to as many as fifteen different biological agents released during scud missile attacks. A heavyhearted Mary Margaret brooded over the sonogram, too. “I see two arms!” she exclaimed with excitement. When Saddam Hussein was executed, she and William actually had a party. They invited friends over, had margaritas, and seven bean dip. They played “Pin the tail” on the dead dictator, a blow up of Saddam, black-hooded and swinging from a rope.

On the monitor, the white snowball quivered, opening up a bit, elongating, like the baby might be stretching. Absorbedly, they all leaned closer.

“It’s a boy!” the Chinese doctor said with a magnificent smile.

“Thank you, sweet Jesus-“ William was ecstatic. He stared at the image of his son, like he was seeing God himself.

But Mary Margaret was not as easily assured. She scrutinized the blob of light that was the child's head. "Doctor, does his head look too big to you?"

The doctor's Oriental eyes narrowed, studying the oscillating splotch of soft cartilage. Uneasily the distressed parents waited for the verdict.

"He looks perfect-" the doctor said. And then they all grinned so widely, it looked like they were having a face splitting contest.

After the doctor visit, William and Mary Margaret decided to celebrate with a splurge, a trip to their favorite buffet, the Golden Corral. With William not employed and having no luck getting any remuneration from the government for his illness so far and working on his third appeal for disability from Social Security, the couple preferred to eat at home which was a lot cheaper. But 8.99 for all you can eat, including shrimp and steak was a deal they could finagle. Happily, at the Western themed restaurant, they ate until they were stuffed to the gills. Mary Margaret had three servings of banana pudding for dessert, and she managed to sneak a paper napkin full of fried shrimp into her Payless purse for her mother to snack on later. When they left, arm in arm, several hours later the new parents were satisfied they'd gotten their money's worth.

At her baby shower, Mary Margaret marveled at all the gifts she received from generous family and friends. The livingroom of their small row-house (freshly dusted and vacuumed) was full to bursting with well-wishers snacking on hors d'hoerves (sweet and sour meatballs, barbeque hotdogs, buffalo wings, fruit, cheese, and veggies) and sipping wine coolers or bottles of Coors Lite. After opening each gift for their new baby boy: a stroller, a playpen, a high-chair, a swing set, sailor outfits, bottles, diapers, and toys, Mary Margaret would carefully peel the colored bow from each gift and affix it to her paper plate bonnet, which was fastened around her chin with a length of pale blue ribbon. She looked silly, she

knew, but the hat was a staple at all the Brady baby showers.

While the ladies took over the house for the shower, William and Jack celebrated with a trip to Griffith's Tavern for a couple brews with the boys. Outside, it was a scorcher. March hadn't come in so much like a lion, as like a fire breathing dragon. Already there had been ten days of temperatures in the sweltering nineties, and the month wasn't even half over yet. The sky was ablaze with oblong clouds of fiery orange, violet, and red, like blasts from a blow torch. It was a Code Red Day, the newscasters advising anybody with respiratory issues to stay indoors. Regardless, William and Jack decided to hoof it the three sweltering blocks to the bar so they could stop along the way at Rite Aid to purchase a box of twenty cigars with blue bands declaring, *It's a Boy!*

At Griffith's Tavern, called the "Ice House" by some old timers who used to actually buy blocks of ice there decades ago, the regulars kept no less than three drinks in front of William at all times. He drank himself stupid, as Jack distributed cigars and munched on bar snacks, peeling three whole pickled onions slowly one by one, and savoring them like exotic fruit.

The bar was packed, every stool occupied. At a line of Poker and Cherry Master slot machines which flashed and whirred, eager fingers fed in their paychecks, hoping for a sweet roll and a hefty payout. A confetti of cigarette butts, peanut shells, and losing Keno tickets littered the ancient linoleum floor. If you felt beneath the rim of the bar, your fingers grazed a forest of hard nubs, fossilized gum. Years ago, the beer was kept in unique copper bins, packed with ice, the coldest beer in the state. Construction workers, firemen, and your average Joes waited in a line alongside of John's Hopkins professors, lawyers, and moneyed Roland Park bluebloods which reached halfway down the block just to get in. But eventually, because it wasn't cost efficient, the owner got rid of the copper bins and installed inferior aluminum refrigerators like everybody else.

Outside, the tin siding of the small corner bar blazed. But inside the twelve stool

barroom, the air-conditioning blasted and felt wonderful. The place opened up at six in the morning for regulars who wanted a cold one before work. Pat, the bartender, a surly, hulking Irishman, sold Ace pocket combs and Scope miniatures to those pitiful few who hadn't yet made it home and needed to tidy up quick for a 7:00AM job painting or hanging sheetrock. You could buy Roloids and Alka-Seltzer, too, for a buck a pop.

Mike, a tall and gangly regular with a busted nose, like a bruised strawberry, from falling in the back alley several nights ago on a drunk, clamped his scrawny arm about William's neck, crowing, "Drink up, Daddy, while you got the chance! Cause diaper duty's coming!" And the crowd barked with laughter.

By last call, William could barely lift his head, he was so sauced. His eyes were as glazed as Crispy Crème donuts. But he was happy, so happy. He fumbled with his wallet, a familiar wad, falling apart like old parchment, for a black and white photo of a smirking young man in a green army helmet which appeared a size too big for him. Shirtless and with a cigarette dangling from the corner of his lip, the young man leaned against a tree in a densely foliated Vietnam jungle, as relaxed as if he were posing in his own backyard. Apparently the 21 year old had just arrived in the foreign land, had not yet seen battle, experienced hand to hand combat, malaria, monsoons, jungle rot, land mines, or tasted the acrid tang of Agent Orange. Routinely, Agent Orange, a man-made herbicide, named for the tangerine striped barrels it was stored in, was sprayed from helicopters to strip the lush green leaves from the jungle trees and smoke out the Gooks. But it also stripped the easy smiles off thousands of U.S. soldiers' faces, replacing them with grimaces of pain from a host of cancers and terminal illnesses attributed to Agent Orange's exposure. Carefully William palmed the photo, showing Jack. "You know who this is?" he slurred.

"Sure, I do-" Jack was still relatively sober, intent on making sure his son-in-law got home safely without getting rolled in a back alley by a junkie prostitute or a gangster teen. "That's your Pop-"

“That’s my Pop-“ William repeated, his chin buckling with emotion. “That’s my *Pop*-“ Beer tears streamed steadily down his whiskered cheeks. Then he rubbed them away with the sleeve of his father’s worn army jacket. At just forty-six years old, William’s Pop died of Hodgkin’s disease. Dirt poor and drowning in medical bills his HMO wouldn’t cover, all he was able to bequeath to his son was the beloved jacket on his back and a burning desire to serve his country, no matter what the cost. A die-hard patriot, William’s Pop never grew bitter, attended the VFW pancake breakfasts in his wheel-chair right up until the week he died.

“You ready, Freddie?” Jack peeled off some bills from his money clip, adorned with a small silver American flag.

“Night, boys-“ The Griffith’s crew called after father-in-law and son, as they lumbered out the door into a now blustery March night. The wind slammed into them. A toasted William braced against Jack for support, and the two trudged along, startled by the sudden dramatic change of climate. Trash and leaves swirled in the street, dancing dervishes, and the wind bansheed off whipping stop signs. The black grates protecting liquor stores and mini-marts from 4AM raids by the local thugs and gang bangers clanged horrendously. Tornado weather. Broadsided, Jack and William forged ahead, with squinted eyes, cackling hysterically, like underdogs with their heads bulled into a giant’s gut.

“Hells and bells-“ Jack intoned, as his nose dripped, and the wind howled.

Chapter Two

On an unusually rainy evening in June, Mary Margaret's water broke, and William rushed her to the hospital in Jack's beat-to-hell station wagon, the faux paneling of which scabbed up and washed away in the monumental downpour on the windy freeway. As Mary Margaret moaned with birth pangs, hunkered back in her seat which was reclined as far as it could go, the sky darkened from a pale translucent gray to the color of slate and released a deluge of golf ball sized hail that sprayed the car like machine gun fire, shoving their already frazzled nerves over the edge to near hysteria.

"Pull over! Pull over!" Mary Margaret pleaded.

"I got this! I got this!" William insisted. Amp-ed up, the new daddy kept his pedal to the metal.

Ropes of water slashed the windows, turning their world into a terrifying blur. And the hail actually cracked the windshield in several places and dented the hood, but William didn't slow down for even a fraction, barreling past other vehicles pulled to the shoulder or hunkered under bridges.

"You're gonna kill us all!" Mary Margaret wailed.

In her hospital room, Mary Margaret alternately gnawed on chipped ice and buried her head in her pillow when her screams of pain became uncontrollable. A concerned nurse brought in an electrical contraption with a needle that moved during contractions, measuring their intensity. The resulting waves were off the charts, the crests so enormous they didn't even have a measurement. Mary Margaret's face was puffed up like a blow-fish's and red as a boiled lobster's, her eyes swollen little slits gleaming with pure terror. She dug her nails so hard into William's palms, they bled.

"I'll get the doctor-" the alarmed nurse bustled out.

In the delivery room, Mary Margaret pushed with all her might, trying to shove the baby out. "I can't! I can't!" she protested.

"Keep pushing-" Doctor Li instructed. "You're doing great. The baby's coming-" Working below, he caught the child, as slippery as an eel, as it slid out into the cold sterile room. The boy's body was finely formed. With a smile, the doctor swabbed some clumps of mucus, blood, and afterbirth from the boy's face. And then his smile froze. He didn't spank the child to start respiration because without so much as a whimper the little fellow was already contentedly breathing. The stumped doctor held the baby's small body directly under a bright lamp. Peering into his little face, he saw two enormous eyes staring serenely back at him, with quarter-sized brown irises, double the size of an ordinary baby's, encased in unusually large, rounded eye sockets. The alert eyes glistened like deep wells, pools without bottoms. The Chinese doctor rubbed his own tired eyes, at first thinking the irregularity was a trick of his mind, the result of a long exhausting day or irritated contacts. But no, there they *were*, irises *twice* the normal size, a peculiar physiognomy that flatly baffled. A quiet bewilderment undulated through the hospital room. No gasps. No groans. For the huge eyes were not a gross disfigurement, so much as a curious, somewhat bizarre anomaly. Everybody's mouths were slightly opened, as if poised to articulate, but finding no words.

And still the baby didn't cry, simply peered curiously around at his surroundings, with his little brow scrunched, like a tiny Sherlock Holmes, with double monocles, accessing his new environment.

Panting, like a dog that's spent too much time out in the heat, William snatched in some shallow, ragged breaths. "What's....wrong....with him?"

Doctor Li scratched his head with confusion. He checked the baby's vitals, heartbeat, reflexes. All normal. "I'm not sure-" was his final evaluation. "Maybe nothing-"

Mary Margaret reached for her baby. She cradled him like any new mother would.

“Maybe he’ll grow into them-“ she said, optimistically.

William named the unusual, big-eyed baby Evan, after a buddy of his who died of Gulf War Syndrome who had shared a cockpit with him for two nerve-wracking years flying in enemy territory in Kuwait.

Back home, the baby ate dutifully, slept through the night without a single cry of complaint, never fussed, and sucked his perfect little finger with contentment even when left alone. The child was a tranquil and indifferent spirit, who wrung nights of worry from Mary Margaret, who yearned only for her baby to cry for her one time, to reach out for her, or throw a fit if she left him alone. Gripping his Budweiser, William would sit in a chair in the baby’s room, brooding. Glumly, he watched his strange son. One time when he got lit, he pinched the child just to try and get a reaction from him. But the baby gave him such a glare of reproach with his enormous, keen eyes that his father stumbled back, embarrassed, head lowered in shame, and darted from the room.

On a sticky afternoon in late September, the Brady family walked across the street to the Saint Thomas Aquinas Church on the corner of 37th Street and Hickory Avenue for Evan’s big day. He was getting christened, as all the Brady babies did. It was his very first trip outside of the house. The sidewalks were polka-dotted with monkey balls, those rank fruits which fell from the neighborhood trees and squished and spurted if you happened to step on one, filling the air with a skunk like protest of foul-smelling goo.

“Watch the monkey-balls, Mom-“ Mary Margaret warned Violet, who diligently ponied around the stinking things.

Jack and William wore the only suits they owned, the same ones they wore to funerals. Affixed to Jacks lapel was a small, dapper clump of blue forget-me-nots. Mary Margaret and Violet wore knee-length floral print dresses with imitation lace collars bought on the sale rack at Target. Evan, himself, was trussed up in a white christening gown, a spotless garment which

had cost the Brady's a pretty penny. The family still hadn't quite got used to the child's over-sized eyes, but if anybody else looked askance at baby Evan they were treated with icy and united stares of disapproval from the small clan.

Inside the grand church, a majestic affair with a twenty foot high ceiling, the congregation tried to be decent, to be *Christian*, but it was hard. As they sang hymns and prayed in their pews, adults and children alike attempted to sneak peaks at the curious baby's huge eyes. Hot scarlet crept up into William's neck, but he pressed down his anger out of respect for the Lord.

When it finally came time, William proudly cradled his son at the foot of the pulpit, surrounded by his stalwart family. Self-consciously, he sniffed the air, praying he hadn't caught a whiff of the offensive monkey-balls and fighting the urge to check the bottoms of his shoes.

"Bless this precious child, Evan Michael...-" The Priest intoned some Latin words and made some esoteric gestures. Then he dipped his cool, dry fingers into the sacred bowl of holy water. But as the priest's drenched, consecrated fingers, slowly and gently approached little Evan to anoint his forehead, the baby's big eyes fluttered wildly in his face, and he proceeded to turn, with astonishing rapidity, a very agitated shade of crimson. The child appeared absolutely panicked, even terrified by the priest's sanctified digits. Strangled gurgles of protest bubbled up from the infant's fear-contorted lips, and he flailed his tiny arms and legs, as if he might actually jump rather than be christened.

Stopping short, the concerned priest just stared across at William.

"Go on, Father-" William said tightly. And he gripped the protesting child.

When the priest tried again, his wet hand drawing minutely closer, the baby's face proceeded to turn an even more alarming shade of blue. The child appeared now to have actually stopped breathing. Seeing her newborn's perfect lips bunched into a blue rosebud, Mary Margaret instinctively shoved the priest's hand away. "Don't you touch him!" she said and swept her baby out of William's arms.

The congregation gaped and murmured collectively, as the Brady's raced with their temperamental new arrival out the stained-glass church doors.

At the hospital, Doctor Li examined the now complacent baby. He was breathing normally again, had settled down almost immediately after being rushed from the Priest and his hallowed hands. Grimly, the Brady Family watched as the doctor shone a light into the boy's humongous eyes. Nobody spoke. Nobody wanted to acknowledge the plain and simple fact that this strange child had been terrified by God's holy water. Fuming, William glared down at his black Payless dress shoes, scuffed in several places from kicking the concrete church steps. Absorbedly, Jack read some hospital pamphlets on diabetes. Mary Margaret chewed her lip and tapped her foot with anxiety. And her mortified mother worked a mint in her dry mouth, with a single-minded ferocity.

"He's fine-" the doctor said. "Whatever happened, he's okay now-"

William huffed, barely containing his simmering anger. "No baby acts like he does. He doesn't cry. He don't seem to give a shit about *us*. And he freaks out when a priest tries to give him God's holy *blessing*. In my mind, that ain't *fine*-"

Embarrassed by William's outburst and raw language, Mary Margaret and Violet skimmed the laminated floor with their humiliated eyes.

"Does he like to be held?" the doctor asked.

"He doesn't mind it-" Mary Margaret offered.

Doctor Li reviewed some of the boy's charts. "He might have some form of mild autism. I'll have to run some more tests to know for sure. Also, I noticed that his...um...unique eyes... appear not to have pupils. But they work just fine. He was able to follow my fingers with no problems-"

"What can we do for him?" Mary Margaret twisted an embroidered handkerchief her mother had stuffed into her hand to mop up a fresh flood of tears.

“All we can do is continue to observe and monitor his behavior. The over-sized eyes could be a rare genetic mutation related somehow to William’s Gulf War Illness. But I don’t really know-“

William leaped to his feet, tossing his chair back. Then, furiously, he strode from the room.

“I’m sorry, Doctor. But this has been really hard on my husband. “Mary Margaret clasped her mother’s dry- vein-y hand.

“Have any of you experienced unusual symptoms similar to Williams? Fatigue? Digestive problems? Rashes? Depression? Psychosis?”

“No, why?”

“Gulf War Illness can be contagious-“

“But what does that have to do with my little Evan?”

“I don’t know. Maybe nothing. I’ve honestly never seen a case like Evan’s. But if it were my son, I’d get on line and find out if any other Desert Storm vets are giving birth to unusual children-“

“Thank you, doctor-“ Mary Margaret picked up her now quiet baby, and the morose trio trudged out.

For the next two years, in her spare time, Mary Margaret searched the internet for any Gulf War veterans with a child like Evan. She found hundreds of vets with children with malformations. But nobody had a big-eyed child like hers. A lot of the affected kids had learning disabilities, too. But not her Evan, who was a spectacularly bright little boy. At two, he could read and speak in whole sentences. But he was also withdrawn, sluggish, listless, bordering on unhappy. At three, he was a loner, preferred solitude to the company of other children who were afraid of him or teased him. They called him “Alien”, “Freak”, and “Headlights”.

When all the other neighborhood children wanted to do was play, Evan ensconced

himself at the kitchen table with his grandfather and read the newspaper or he got on line to read the news. He loved the computer. Mainly Jack read the horse racing section or the obituaries. But Evan preferred the world news. His large eyes devoured the dense pages of the newspaper or the lit-up computer screen, like a high-powered stock broker studying the Wall Street Exchange.

“Why don’t you go and play out back with the other kids? I bet you’d have fun-“

Jack encouraged him.

“It’s too hot-“ Evan peered across the kitchen, past the window sill, through the heat waffled air, down the length of the backyard, past the picnic table, past the sagging three foot pool, and past the clothes line pinned with dingy, wilted drawers, beyond the chain-linked gate, clasped shut, to where the boys and girls played: chalking hopscotches, flicking marbles, riding bicycles, running and squealing, their wavering bodies enshrouded by curls of heat, like distant mirages, which rose up from the baking alley...outside.

Out there, mulberries smeared the concrete, filling the air with the same sweet fragrance as simmering jam. Sometimes an errant breeze would waft the enticing smell down the length of the backyard and into the kitchen window.

“That’s what we got your pool for-“ Jack countered. “Look at all the other kids having a great time-“

“They don’t like me-“ the boy replied.

“If they got a chance to know you, they would. Invite them in for a swim-“

But the sad little boy just shook his head. “Why does father call you Mr Olives?”

Evan asked, purposefully changing the subject.

Jack rose and produced three different jars of olives from the refrigerator. He lined the jars up, plucking one olive from each container, and arranging them according to size. Small, medium, and large. As he stared down at his favorite treat, Jack grinned. “They call me Mr Olives because I eat a lotta olives-“ He popped the biggest one, a plump Spanish olive, a

rich dark shade of moist brown, into his mouth, and chewed happily. “Wanna know a secret about olives?”

“Sure-“ the boy said.

“The biggest are the best-“ Then Jack nodded sagely, and he winked at his grandson.

At this, Evan actually smiled, something he did infrequently. Even at three, he knew his grandfather was trying to cheer him up, hoping to make him feel better about his oddity, his jumbo peepers.

“Try one-“ Jack said.

The boy popped the biggest dark olive he could find into his mouth and chewed.

“Like it?”

Serenely, Evan nodded.

“Cool beans-“ the grandfather said.

“What’s that mean?” the boy seemed genuinely stumped.

“Cool bananas-“ the grandfather said.

But little Evan didn’t get it.

“If two people share a moment of connection, a special moment, then I say, “Cool beans-“ or “Cool bananas-“

Satisfied, the boy enjoyed another big olive. “Cool apples-“ Evan said, which tickled his grandfather whose eyes crinkled with mirth. Instinctively Jack reached out and hugged his unconventional grandchild. And surprisingly, Evan leaned into the old man’s embrace, tentatively hugging him back. The boy breathed in the clean lime-scented after-shave his grandfather wore, wondering where it came from. And underneath he smelled the human smell, the stale oily flesh covered in dirt clogged pores which normally offended his tiny nostrils. It was a big step for the child who usually shunned such intimate contact. As Jack chuckled, the boy continued grinning.

Then William stumbled in the back door, already reeking of Seagram’s Seven

whiskey at four in the afternoon, and he carried the human smell, too, but much stronger than the grandfather's. Evan thought of Pigpen, that cartoon character always enrobed in his cloud of filth whom he observed one Saturday afternoon on the TV. Having been turned down by Social Security for disability a third and final time, William took to spending more time at Griffith's Tavern, away from his family. He felt bad that he couldn't work, hated his wife pulling double shifts at the diner which left her grumpy, aching, and exhausted. They were eating a lot of TV dinners now and microwave food since Mary Margaret didn't have the time to cook proper. Sometimes an odd job would surface, and William would tape up his knees and ankles beforehand to help with the inevitable pain and swelling. Usually the jobs were construction-type work, gutting condemned houses with a sledgehammer, slinging concrete bricks off three story roofs to dumpsters below, or cleaning up the skilled laborers messes. Taking orders from a kid half his age who barely spoke English. But at least it was something. Two days of the back-breaking toil usually required three weeks of recovery time.

Seeing Jack hugging his boy irritated the hell out of William. The boy had never hugged him. Not once. William glared at Evan.

"Were you good today? Did you listen to your Grandpop?" Even after he asked this, William saw the foolishness in his question, because the boy always obeyed his grandfather, his mother, and grandmother, too. He never gave them a bit of trouble.

"Yes, father-" the boy replied, unwrapping his arms from around his grandfather, sensing William's disapproval, and sitting solemnly back down.

Straddling a kitchen chair which sprouted puffs of white stuffing like steam, William snapped. "Don't call me *father*. I'm your *Pop*-"

With a blank and dispassionate expression, the three year old stared across at this drunken wreck of a man. He tried not to sniff more of his father's repugnant smell.

This rattled William. It made him uncomfortable and jumpy. "Why the hell you staring at me, boy?"

“Cool beans-“ the boy said. “Cool bananas-“

This infuriated William even more. He hopped up. “Are you making *fun* of me?”

Jack jumped to the boy’s defense. “I taught him that-“ he interjected quickly, sensing his son-in-law’s volatile state.

But William wouldn’t be allayed. He prowled closer to his small son. “You think you’re smarter than me, don’t you?”

Evan froze up, didn’t know what to say. His big eyes seemed to actually expand a fraction in his tiny pale face, as if with acute distress.

“You think you’re a tough guy, don’t you? You never cry just to *aggravate* me. Well let’s see who the real man in this family is-“ He seized the shocked boy up out of his chair by the cuff of his neck, frog-marching him upstairs with one hand and unbuckling his leather strap with the other. Evan bucked and wriggled, trying to worm his way out of his father’s grip. But it was no use.

“For Pete’s sake, William, he’s just a kid. Let him alone!” Jack protested. But he didn’t follow them. Even when he heard the bedroom door slam shut, Jack knew better than to interfere between a man and his son. He’d taken quite a few whippings from his own father, a tough-as-nails lifer at the Sparrows Point docks, which never diluted his love for the old man.

When the whipping started, Jack cringed, listening to the boy’s wails of protest. He prayed for the kid to just cry and get it over with. But the whipping went on for some time. Jack’s arthritic hands shook, so he clutched the table with his knotted fingers to still them. And he grinded his mercury-filled molars until the assault was over. Thank God, his wife and Mary Margaret were still at the church Bingo. When the beating finally stopped, Jack let out a long breath of relief and sagged in his seat.

A minute later, a granite-faced William, clumsily refastening his belt, rolled by Jack. His son-in-law’s nostrils flared around the edges with white hot anger, and his lips were a compressed, colorless line of fury. “I’m going back to the bar-“ was all he said, banging the

loose screen-door on his way out and letting in some whiffs of boiling air.

It took Jack about thirty seconds to scurry up the stairs to his grandson. He found the boy curled up into a tight ball in the center of his parents' huge bed and whimpering pathetically.

"Evan-" Jack said.

But when the boy lifted his head, his face was as dry as the Brady front lawn, a postage-stamp-sized plot of parched earth and brittle, sun-singed yellow grass, made all the more pathetic by two rows of plastic flowers Mary Margaret had planted which drooped just as much as the real ones in the over-powering heat. Evan's big eyes hadn't shed a single tear. Jack's chest expanded with pride, blooming with love and admiration for this strange and stubborn child.

"Let's get out of this place-" Jack suggested.

"Where are we going?"

"Someplace special-"

Chapter Four

Through the sweltering twilight air which clung to their skin like wet glue and tinged the world the color of a bruise, Jack and little Evan plodded along, passing a cemetery with numerous cracked and toppled headstones scattered about the shriveled soil, the dried-up black Earth. Above them, a wash of incandescent orange, like a low flame, glazed the hazy sky. They slogged on until they reached a rather large, but nondescript building, and then they descended some urine-smelling stairs to an unmarked door, painted red. Little Evan held his nose, as he watched his grandfather rap four times. When presently the door opened, Jack shook hands with a very tanned and bulky man. They had a secret handshake, they gripped wrists, then pressed certain knuckles with certain fingers. Finally the man ushered them into a foyer with anemic-looking walls.

Little Evan hovered shyly behind his grandfather who reached back for him, shoving him front and center for the hulking man's inspection.

Scrutinizing Evan's extraordinary eyes, the tanned man gnawed a cherry-smelling cheroot. He nodded with satisfaction. "Welcome-" he said to the boy. "I'm Tom Watkins-" "Hello-" was all Evan could think to say.

Displayed in a glass case was an enormous book. Evan strolled over, stood on his tiptoes to see it. "What's this?" he asked.

"You tell us-" his grandfather replied.

Evan read aloud some gold letters on the book's leather cover. "The King Jame's Version of the Holy Bible-"

"He's smart-" Tom conceded.

Scouting around, Evan approached a symbol encased in glass on the wall. It was a large letter E encircled by a five pointed star. "And what's this?"

"E stands for enlightenment....here we build our minds-"

Evan pondered this response a moment. "Can I join this club?"

Both men smiled down at the tiny sincere boy.

"What's this club called?" Evan asked.

"The Order-" Jack responded. "Follow us-"

Curious, Evan trailed them through a dim hallway, up some narrow stairs, to a dark room. Inside, on a table in the center of the room, burned twelve tall candles arranged in a perfect triangle. A dozen men, of all shapes and sizes, ringed the table. Between each candlestick was a glass of red wine. In the center of the triangle was placed a small coffin, upon which sat a copy of the Bible and a skull and cross-bones. Quietly Evan stood beside his grandfather. A tall gaunt-faced man in a suit jacket clasped Jack's hand warmly. "Good evening, Master Davis-" he said.

Chapter Five

Later that night when Evan and his grandfather returned home, their spirits were renewed, the bond between them was stronger than ever, and their minds were rife with secrets.

“There they are-“ Violet scolded. “Where the devil have you two been?”

“Just out walking-“ Jack said.

At the kitchen table, Mary Margaret sat at her computer, confounded. The thing was stuck. The smug gray face of an alien stared back at her. “Something is wrong-“ Her forehead was stitched with worry. She pecked some keys at random. But nothing helped.

Evan scooted over. “It’s a virus-“ he said.

“What do you know about viruses?” Jack asked. The three year old amazed him more and more every day.

“A virus can destroy your hard-drive-“

“That’s right-“ Jack said.

“You mean I can’t fix it?” Mary Margaret bemoaned.

“You’re spending WAY too much time in the house on the computer-“ William admonished his son.

Standing on his tiptoes, Evan started lightly tapping some keys.

“Don’t mess with that! If you break it, we can’t afford another one!” William grumbled.

But Evan’s small fingers flew.

His father was just about to snatch the keyboard away from him when it sprang to life. The alien face was gone now, replaced by a blue waterfall welcome scene.

“How did you do that?” Evan’s grandfather marveled.

Evan shrugged.

“The boy got lucky-“ William said.

“Evan looked like he knew exactly what he was doing to me-“ Jack defended his grandson.

“Fix the air conditioner then, Big Shot-“ William countered. Their AC had been broken for three miserable days.

“Let him try it-“ Jack agreed.

“No! Enough!” William bellowed now. “I’ll look at it myself later tonight-“ A dingy washcloth looped around his neck was sopping with sweat.

“Thanks for fixing Mommy’s laptop-“ Mary Margaret started scooping ice cream into bowls to help them all cool off.

Jack dug into his. “Want some rocky road, buddy?” he asked Evan.

“No thank you, Grandpop-“ Then Evan trudged dutifully up to his room. “Goodnight, Everyone-“ Ten o’clock was his bedtime, and he never argued to stay up later like other kids. He seemed to like to stick to a routine. Breakfast at nine, lunch at twelve, dinner at five, and bed at ten.

“What kind of kid doesn’t like ice cream?” his grandmother clucked. Her silver ice-cream spoon was spackled with her crimson lipstick.

“I’m glad he avoids sweets-“ Mary Margaret said. “It saves us on dentist’s bills-“ But really she wished her boy would act more normal. He never ate the candy in his Christmas stocking or Easter basket, just the orange and the walnuts. And to William’s consternation, his boy wouldn’t touch meat, not even chicken nuggets which every kid adores. If they took him to McDonalds, he refused to eat, just quietly dismantled his happy meal toy then put it back together again.

Ten minutes later, Mary Margaret limped up the stairs (her arches had started falling from working so many doubles at the diner) to tuck Evan in. She rarely got a chance to do so

and really liked it when she could. She inched open his door and shuffled inside, finding the small boy already snugly between the sheets in his pajamas but still wide awake. Pensively, he stared up at the ceiling. His big eyes reflected some gold flecks of light from a nearby sea-shell nightlight. "Mother-" he asked her. "Can people fly?"

"No-" she replied, sitting on the side of his bed, and tentatively stroking his damp, shampoo-smelling hair. He didn't flinch, so she continued to caress his baby-soft locks, trying not to betray the greedy hunger in her fingertips, aching to touch her son. Then as an afterthought, she asked, "Why?"

"There are people with wings on my ceiling-"

Mary Margaret's hand ceased moving. In her Parenting Guides, she read that it wasn't unusual for a very young child to see a ghost or have an imaginary friend, even a guardian angel. So she glanced up at the empty expanse of ceiling, too. Then her heart started to thud with a truly terrifying thought. Her mind raced back to little Evan's reaction to the Catholic priest. What if he was seeing those *other* winged creatures....demons? Instantly her throat dried up. She tried not to panic, tried to keep her voice at a cool maternal measure. "What... do they look like, sweetie?"

His distinctive eyes fanned the ceiling. "They have white robes, lined with gold. And yellow hair, bright as the sun. With faces pale as the moon. They're beautiful. Their wings are almost as long as they are. Look, mother-"

A somewhat relieved Mary Margaret obliged the child, tipping her head back. But she saw nothing but a desolate wall of plaster, in need of a good paint job and spider-ed with some cracks.

Then his little finger came up, pointing them out, counting the ethereal creatures one by one. "They're all just floating up there....six.....seven....eight....nine...ten-"

"They must be guardian angels-" she said finally.

"What are guardian angels?"

“God’s helpers. They protect people-“

“Do I need protection?”

Mary Margaret was stumped. She licked her dry lips. “Why don’t you ask them?” was all she could think to say. Nowhere in her parent’s guides did it cover an inscrutable, satellite-eyed, three-and-a-half-year old with ten guardian angels.

“Hello, angels-“ the boy said. “Are you here to protect me?”

Mother and son waited for an answer. After a suitable time had passed, Mary Margaret spoke. “What did they say, Evan?”

“Nothing, mother. They’re very quiet. But their eyes shine like stars-“

“I wish I could see them-“ Mary Margaret said.

For a while they stared at the empty ceiling together.

Then Evan asked his mother the question Mary Margaret had been dreading for some time. “Mother, why do I look different then everyone else?”

“I don’t know-“ she said. She didn’t want to lie to him. “We’ll just have to keep searching the internet and watching the news and reading the newspapers until we find out-“

“How long will that take?”

“Maybe a while-“

He seemed disappointed, deflated.

“But that doesn’t mean you can’t live a full and happy life until then-“ she insisted.

He did not reply.

“Evan, promise me you won’t let your being a little different be an excuse not to live your life to the fullest-“

“I promise, mother-“

But, for the next six months, Evan seemed to grow more and more distant and reserved. He was like a polite, but odd houseguest. The only thing he ever got excited about

was the walks he took twice a week with his Grandpop to their special place and the Sunday church service at the Presbyterian Church Mary Margaret started taking him to soon after his visitation from the angels. On Falls Road, the Presbyterian church was held in a form-stone rowhouse. It was a small place, but filled with a big spirit. Mary Margaret selected it because it looked something like their own house, nothing fancy or imposing, nothing ornate, like the Catholic cathedral which had nearly scared baby Evan to death. She hoped maybe he'd be more comfortable at the smaller church, and her thoughtfulness paid off. He liked it right from the start. He joined in with the singing and the clapping (though not as zealously as some of the others who stomped and twirled in the aisles). In the hard wooden pews which made even Mary Margaret squirm, Evan sat upright, listening intently to the Word of God. If his grandmother tried to pass him a cherry Life-savor, he would shake his head and politely decline, causing her to pinch her lips and roll her eyes heavenward.

Four Sundays in a row, the preacher spoke about Revelations, Armageddon, the final battle in Jerusalem when Jesus will stand on the Mount of Olives and defeat the wicked sinners who refuse to submit to His will, the end of 6000 years of man's misrule, the end of the world as we know it. And Evan absorbed this information like a dry sponge soaking up water. On the last Sunday, Evan marched right up to the pulpit with several adults to get saved, as a teary congregation sang, "Just as I am, without one plea, but that they blood was shed for me. I come.....I cooo-mmmme-" The preacher shook Evan's hand, somewhat confounded by the tiny, big-eyed boy's presence. "Do you know what getting saved means?" the preacher whispered down to him, thinking maybe the three year old was just following the adults, like kids will. But when the child responded earnestly with, "I want the Lord to live in my heart-", The humbled preacher said, "Okay then-, and he prayed over the boy, as Evan asked Jesus to come in. Afterwards, the preacher asked if Evan had any questions.

"If enough people get saved, will God still send the seven angels with their trumpets to punish us?"

Again the preacher was shocked by the boy's keen understanding. "I don't know-" he stammered, "Maybe not-"

"Then I'm gonna pray for everybody to get saved-"

"I will, too-" the preacher agreed, and respectfully, he shook the unusual child's hand a second time. Then he draped his arm around the small boy and turned him around to face a very curious congregation, who chattered quietly among themselves about the boy's gigantic eyes. "Blessed are the little children-" the smiling preacher intoned, and the congregation couldn't disagree, nodding their heads and shouting, "Amen!" and "Praise the Lord!"

Evan began e-mailing the preacher religious questions. He loved to discuss the Bible, and the preacher was impressed by the little boy's curious mind and hunger for the word of God.

Still, even with these improvements, Evan barely spoke to William, only when absolutely necessary. His mother's and grandmother's presences he seemed to tolerate better and better, even offering to help them sometimes with the cooking or setting the table or taking out the trash. In the evenings when Evan watched TV, it was always the news.

Bleary-eyed, William would sulk in from the bar, cut his eyes at the introverted boy ensconced on the sofa, and snarl, "Good evening, Dan Rather-"

But he couldn't get a rise out of his son whose large eyes seemed to inhale the TV's images of war, earthquakes, tsunamis, draughts, genocide, civil unrest, murder, and mayhem.

With a melancholy monotony, Evan's days passed. A concerned Mary Margaret took a weekend off work. She rented some movies from Blockbuster: Mary Poppins, Black Beauty, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. Anything she thought might cheer Evan up and divert his little mind from all the doom and gloom. She micro-waved popcorn and sat with him. Heartily she laughed at the family films, which she hadn't seen in years and really enjoyed watching again. At the funny parts, she'd glance over now and then to see if Evan

would even crack a smile. But it was always the same serious expression.

“What are you thinking about so hard, Evan?”

In all her life, Mary Margaret had never seen such a doleful, tormented child.

“I love you, mother-“ the small boy hushed.

“Oh, Evan-“ Mary Margaret palmed the boy’s soft face. It was one of the most pleasurable moments in her whole life. “Look at me-“

His big, luminous eyes reflected her own smaller, worried ones right back to her.

“How can I help you?” If she could just ease his burden for a single moment. Her face crumpled with her helplessness and her absolute love for this mysterious child.

“I don’t know-“ the boy said.

Chapter Six

The day started like any other Saturday. With his bare feet curled beneath him on the sofa, four year old Evan sat, nibbling his oatmeal with raisins. Gore Vidal was on The Today Show, discussing global warming and the alarming rise of sea levels worldwide, then Tom Brokaw appeared on Meet The Press to talk about alternative sources of fuel, with gas at an all time high. Evan's grandparents and William were still upstairs sleeping. But a bright-eyed Mary Margaret was busy in the kitchen, baking homemade blueberry muffins. She'd taken the day off, her first Saturday off in months. Cheerfully, she hummed a hymn.

When the doorbell rang, Mary Margaret sprang to answer it. The boy was not allowed. Stranger Danger.

From the hallway came the high-pitched chatter of excited new voices. Evan lifted his solemn head up. He saw a skinny lady in a jean jumper, leading a child into the room. The tow-headed, freckle-faced kid was about Evan's size, and he wore dark sunglasses, the kind blind people wear.

"I'm sorry. I know we're early-" the lady said.

"No problem. Welcome, Pauline-" After rubbing some flour from her hands onto her apron, Mary Margaret hugged the lady hard, with unabashed excitement. Her flour spackled fingers even trembled a little.

"Evan, meet Alexander-" Mary Margaret said.

"Hello, Alexander-" Evan said.

"Hello-" Alex mumbled.

The lady in the jumper leaned down and whispered to Alexander. "We're inside now. Can you please take your sunglasses off?"

Slowly, Alexander removed his impenetrable glasses, revealing two immense eyes, identical to Evan's.

Mesmerized, the two boys stared across at one another. Then like magnets, they

gravitated toward each other, with the special affinity of identical twins meeting for the first time, only they weren't twins at all, just two small boys with very different faces, encasing the same magnificent eyes.

With both mothers watching, with their normal eyes brimming with un-spilled tears, Evan took Alexander's hand, clasping it tenderly, like one brother meeting another.

"Are Alexander's eyes sensitive to the sunlight?" Mary Margaret asked Pauline.

"No. It's just the other kids...the teasing...so he hides them...he gets embarrassed-" Her voice trailed off, as if wanting to put that pain far away, into the past. "But now...hopefully...he has a new friend-"

Overwhelmed, the boys couldn't stop staring at each other. They were speechless, content to gaze with wonder at the miracle that was the two of them,

"Would you like to help me out in the kitchen?" Mary Margaret asked Pauline, wanting to give the boys some space.

"Sure-" Pauline agreed.

Out in the kitchen, the two mothers worked, mixing batter and buttering muffin tins, but also trying to catch glimpses of Evan and Alexander now and then through an adjoining brick buffet bar built into the wall which separated the kitchen from the diningroom.

"What are they doing?" Pauline craned her neck to see.

"They're still just standing there, not saying anything-"

"You know there are others. We came here because yours was the closest place to where we live in Pittsburg-"

"I know. I talked to a lady in Nebraska and another in California. Thank God for the internet-"

"It's boys and girls, did you know that?" Pauline sucked on a fresh blueberry.

“No-“

“I took Alexander to Harvard where some scientists examined him and some of the other children. Only a handful of the kids had a parent exposed to Gulf War syndrome. I think that’s why it took us so long to find each other. No common thread-“

“I’m just glad we never gave up-“ The two women exchanged fatigued, but exhilarated smiles, like best buddies crossing the finish line of a grueling marathon.

Then Pauline continued. “Some of the scientists are speculating that what’s happening to our kids is “natural selection”...some kind of adaptive evolution....the emergence of an advantageous genetic mutation...which might eventually lead to the rise of a new and different species-“

Mary Margaret tried hard not to gape. “Wow-“ was all she could manage. Her brain dredged up some terms from high school biology. Phenotypes. Genotypes. Alleles. Even then, studying hard, Mary Margaret had just passed by the skin of her teeth.

“But not all of the scientists agree. Because they say spontaneous mutations are very rare. And advantageous mutations are even more rare-“ Pauline added.

“Then what the heck is going on?” Mary Margaret twisted a stubby dish towel adorned with roosters in her hands.

“Beats me-“

“Does Alexander ever mention seeing....angels?”

“No-“ Pauline looked at the other mother now like she had two heads. So Mary Margaret quickly let the subject drop.

Both mothers clammed up when Alexander and Evan strolled in.

“Mother, may we play in the pool?” Evan asked. He had never once ventured into the pool before. Even on the hottest days, when the temperatures reached one hundred and five degrees, straining their single air-conditioning unit.

“Sure-“ Mary Margaret said, ecstatic that her child was requesting to perform a normal activity.

“Have fun, guys-“ Pauline said.

It took Mary Margaret only about a minute to recall that Evan couldn’t actually swim. The backyard pool wasn’t deep, only three feet, but that was enough water to drown a small child. Dropping her oven mitt, she charged outside.

To her astonishment, she found her son and Alexander swimming happily beneath the turquoise water, like two Duracell powered guppies, torpedoing round and round. From beneath the water, their strange eyes appeared even more enormous, seemed to catch the blazing sunshine and glow, like underwater flashlights.

Following Mary Margaret and seeing her surprised expression, Pauline said, “Swimming. It’s something they’re all good at-“

Chapter Seven

Alexander and Evan were good medicine for each other. So Pauline and Mary Margaret became fast friends. Their boys thrived in each other's presence, even grew bold enough to play outside. Alexander threw away his sunglasses. And Evan stopped watching so much depressing news. During the week, the boys Skyped on the computer. But every Saturday, Pauline drove Alexander down from Pittsburg. The two families (minus William) would picnic at the park, go camping, to King's Dominion, or simply to church. The excited mothers started a website devoted to their special children. They were able to locate about fifty in total. They arranged play dates where Alexander and Evan met more children like themselves, even some cute little saucer-eyed girls. The boys sprang to life, teasing the girls, yanking their ponytails and blowing raspberries at them. It was a pleasure to see the children come out of their shells and just be children. But it was a little disconcerting, too. The first time Mary Margaret saw Evan scroll his tongue out to a smart aleck little girl and scream, "Nanny-nanny-boo-boo-" she almost fell out of her lawn chair.

At the neighborhood swimming pool, the small children with the gargantuan eyes became the envy of all the other children because at four years old they glided through the deep water like a pack of happy baby seals. From the shallow end, the other little children, their arms banded with inflated water wings purchased by their safety conscious parents, watched with dismay as their big-eyed counterparts twirled and rolled and flipped in the nine feet of water with the ease of miniature mermaids and mermen. Even when the manager of the pool, Mr Bob, a barrel-chested, sun-fried man, blew his whistle and commanded the tiny swimmers out of the pool to take the adult swimming test in order to be able to stay in the deep end (several mothers had complained it was unfair to their kids who had to take the test and failed), the big-eyed, dripping children graciously obeyed. They lined up one by one, swam the length of the pool like pros, and had no trouble treading water for five minutes,

something which usually left even the most experienced teenagers winded and fatigued.

After the amazing, pint-sized swimmers all passed the test, they jumped back into the water together, laughing and splashing, tanned and happy, like one big family on holiday.

When the scalding, but Glorious Summer drew to an end, Mary Margaret took Evan to the local elementary school #55 to get his physical and his shots for kindergarten. She made William go. He still hadn't made his peace with the boy, preferring just to avoid him. Her scruffy husband went, but he slumped disinterestedly in his plastic chair.

The nurse fussed with a complex-looking optometrist's device which calibrated the children's vision, determining whether or not they were near- or far sighted or needed reading glasses. "Evan, this machine measures how good you can see. It won't hurt a bit. Just put your eyes right where the lenses are and tell me which way the letter E is facing: to the left, to the right, up, or down-"

With his large eyes, Evan peered into the machine. "Left-" he said.

"Correct-" She clicked a button for the frame to change.

"Up-" Evan said.

"Correct-" Another click.

"Down-"

"Correct. Very good, Evan-"

Then the nurse pulled down an eye chart which had several rows of alphabet letters ranging from clear, two inch tall ones at the top to indecipherable, millimeter-sized ones at the bottom. "Read as much of this as you can-" she instructed.

So Evan began reading the letters with perfect accuracy. Even when he got to the

lower lines where the letters were the size of tiny black ants. “E, G, Q, V, T, W, L-“ he recited, as the surprised adults squinted across at the miniscule letters.

“Stop, Evan-“ With her twenty-twenty vision, the nurse couldn’t make out a single letter he was reading. She’d never met a child who could. Curiously, and with a bland smile, she scribbled some notes into the boy’s charts.

Next, Mary Margaret and William watched as little Evan was about to get his first shot. They didn’t expect the needle to bother him, since he never really fussed about anything. But when he saw the school nurse pick up the six inch syringe, his large eyes widened to even a fraction bigger. Clumsily, he backed away from the nurse, clinging to Mary Margaret, just like any normal child would.

“Evan-“ his mother said in her most soothing tone, but secretly delighted the boy was grasping for her, needing her. “It’s gonna be all right-“

William perked up. He jack-knifed in his chair now, taking great interest in the unfolding drama. Four years without a single tear. By God, he *wanted* to see the boy cry.

The nurse rubbed an alcohol soaked cotton ball across Evan’s tanned skinny shoulder. The boy actually grimaced when she pinched a wad of his young skin. And his lips trembled faintly.

William leaned forward in his chair.

When the nurse jabbed the sharp needle into the child’s flesh, he let out one hell of a squawk. But not a drop fell from his eyes.

Exhaling, William slumped back with disappointment.

The next two shots Evan absorbed better, sucking it up like a trooper, and the smiling nurse handed him a lollipop.

“Do you have stickers?“ asked Mary Margaret automatically. “He doesn’t eat candy-“

“Sure-“ the nurse said, rummaging through the band aid drawer for a roll of stickers.

“Good job, Evan-“ Mary Margaret cooed. “I’m so proud of you. No tears for my

brave big boy-“

“Oh didn’t you know?” the nurse interjected softly in an aside to the parents.

“*They* can’t cry....No tear ducts-“

A flabbergasted Mary Margaret just stared across at her small boy. And remembering the beating he’d given Evan, William turned a shade of white which rivaled the nurse’s uniform. A tiny muscle started to flinch above his cheekbone.

“They do feel pain though-“ the nurse added.

A clammy sheen broke out across William’s forehead, and he couldn’t bear to look at the child, at his big, dry, innocent eyes.

“Why no tear ducts?” Mary Margaret asked.

“The scientists aren’t sure yet. It’s just part of their genetic code, like having six fingers or six toes-“

Evan fastened his smiley face sticker to his t-shirt and followed his disturbed parents out to their sweltering station wagon. William’s neck flamed as red now as the line in the thermometer which dangled from the broken rear-view mirror, his face full of heat, like the small bulb at the thermometer’s top, measuring one hundred and six degrees. Nobody spoke on the way home. William’s eyes glassed with unspilled tears. As they passed some fire hydrants gushing torrents of cooling water for some sweating kids, William struggled to choke back a sob.

At home, Evan straggled up to his room to rest, not feeling well after his shots. And downstairs in the kitchen, William reluctantly admitted to his wife about the beating he’d given Evan. At first, she was livid. Her own cheeks flamed with bright mulberry-colored stains of indignation. But watching her husband sob like a baby, something he hadn’t done since he found out she was pregnant four years ago, Mary Margaret realized he was truly remorseful. With his rough face wickered with tears and his shoulders heaving, he clung to her doughy

middle, crying his heart out. So how could she not forgive him?

“You know what you have to do, Will-”

“I know-”

Heavily, as if his boots were made of lead, William made his way up the stairs.

The ascent felt like it took days. His face and eyes stung with sweat, humiliation, and dried tears. For five minutes, with his rounded shoulders drooped, William stood before his son’s shut door. Anxiously he gnawed his lip. Then he whirled on his heels and headed for the shower.

After scrubbing up, he ventured back to Evan’s room. A damp towel cowed his shoulders, and he pulled on some clean boxers. With clumsy knuckles, he tapped.

“Yes?” a small voice inquired.

William inched open the door. “You sleeping?”

“No, sir-”

“I’d like to have a word with you-”

“Okay-”

“Can I sit down?”

“Okay-”

Carefully, William lowered his bulky frame (he’d put on thirty pounds from all the drinking) onto the edge of his son’s bed, a cot that was a hand-me-down from some better off relatives. Mary Margaret had sweetened the deal for her boy by painting the walls in his bedroom green and allowing him to draw his own sea creatures: octopi, sharks, sea horses, myriad fish, dolphins, etc...At Walmart, she even bought him some sheets of stickers: clamshells, seashells, star-fish, penguins, seals, etc....that they adhered to the walls together. Growing up, William had collected baseball cards, and his room was filled with framed photos of the Oriole’s with their signatures scrawled underneath. At least his kid wasn’t asking for Barbie dolls or make-up, thank the Lord. The flimsy bed sagged a good deal under William’s

weight and made him feel like an even crappier father. His spongy belly, puckered and dimpled, drooped over his Hanes waistband. For a while, he rubbed his rough, cracked hands together, staring across at a dime store picture of Jesus and his disciples which Violet had purchased for her grandson at a yard sale. The boy hung it above his dresser, another hand-me-down whose drawers were missing one slat and several knobs. Evan kept his room neat though. His Bible, Encyclopedias, nature books, and Sunday School lessons were stacked across several milk crates which Mary Margaret had lugged home from the diner. Shame, like a heavy hand, pressed William's head down. His lips started to move, almost imperceptibly. But no words would come out.

Watching his father's chin quaver, the boy gave him some time.

Tears leaked from the sun-creaked corners of William's eyes. "I'm....sorry-" he fumbled. "I had no right...to whip you-" Then he buried his beefy face in his palms and began sobbing all over again.

With a soothing rhythm, Evan patted the distressed man's fleshy, acne-riddled backs. "It's okay, Pop-" he said, relieved that his father smelled pleasantly of Dial soap tonight.

"I promise you....I'm gonna change-" With his thick fingers, William tried to squeeze the tears from his red-rimmed eyes.

"I know, Pop-"

"Things are gonna be different between us. Because you're my boy...All right?"

"Yes, Pop-"

"Let's shake on it then. Man to man. No hard feelings-"

The boy slipped his small cool hand into his father's big hot one, and they shook.

The next morning, a torrid Saturday, William took Evan along with him to Griffith's Tavern. As they strolled, the merciless sun roasted their scalps, and the molten asphalt streets squished beneath their sandals. They tried to walk in the shade, zig-zagging from trees to awnings, like drunks, and laughing at their own antics. When they finally reached the

refrigerated oasis that was the Ice House, William hefted his son up on a bar stool whose vinyl cover was cracked in the center to form a star-shaped hole beneath the boy's shorts clad bottom. "Everybody, meet my boy, Evan--"

"Howdy--" the crowd of men said. (It was a stag bar; the presence of women was not encouraged, except for a couple of shaggy neighborhood prostitutes who had regulars there and would tap shyly at the door to offer their services on the weekends). Most of the men were already four or five beers in, so they didn't really give a shit about Evan's unusual eyes. Besides they'd seen a couple of the big-eyed kids in the grocery store or the park or the drugstore already. By the hundreds, even thousands, the strange kids were coming out of the woodwork, in every state now, and in most countries, too. The newspapers were riddled with articles by scientists speculating about them. Even the tabloids ran stories weekly, reporting that the kids' parents had been abducted by aliens and inseminated with an alien race (something the rags had been postulating for decades now and were *still* capitalizing on). So the novelty for the men was wearing off.

"Bud for me. Shirley Temple for the kid--" William said.

Evan twirled on his stool, politely sipping the syrupy pink drink which he really didn't care for while his father swabbed at rivulets of sweat from his own overheated face with a wad of bar napkins.

"You wanna snack, too, buddy?" William pointed out a counter where there were red-hot sausages, Slim Jims, and pickled onions.

"Okay, Pop--" Damp tendrils of hair, like seaweed, framed the boy's face, which was smooth as a pearl.

"Which one?"

The boy shrugged his tiny shoulders.

"Give us one of each, Pat--"

The bartender's fleshy lips flattened to a grim line, the color of cement. His ruddy

face was lesioned with various benign growths and had the texture of a toad's. "Okay. But if the kid pukes, you're cleaning it up-" Pat's baseball-mitt sized hands spread the snacks out before them. LOVE and HATE were tattooed crudely across his knuckles, flattened from years of bouncing drunks.

Evan tried the hot sausage first. He didn't want to embarrass his father. With anticipation, all the regulars watched because they knew the sausages were *hot*. The boy bit off a good sized hunk, chewed the veiny meat reluctantly, then screwed his little face up, and instantly spit the partially masticated hunk into a bar napkin his father managed to slip under his chin, drooling red juice. He gagged and sputtered from the lingering taste of the spicy smoked flesh, but managed somehow not to barf.

Everybody cracked up. Shoulders rose and fell with merriment.

When William tried to get Evan to taste the pickled onion next, the boy simply sniffed the malodorous baseball-sized thing with the slimy, translucent skin and handed it right back to him. "No, thank you, Pop-" he said, which made the regulars laugh even harder to hear the boy's sweet manners.

Gnawing the Slim Jim himself, William rumpled his boy's hair. "Let's play some shuffle-bowl then-" he said, more than satisfied.

Chapter Eight

In the livingroom, Violet sat in her rocker by the open window in a thin cotton nightgown with her white hair crisscrossed with bobby-pins, hoping desperately for a storm. Her bare legs, skinny as a hen's were crossed at the frail ankles, and her Dollar Store slippers drilled the floor with nervous anticipation. It hadn't really rained in Baltimore for months, just some sparse droplets which spattered the dead grass and dried almost instantly upon hitting the sizzling concrete. But today the sky was a flat gray, like the guileless gray of Violet's old eyes. And for sure, she smelled the electric white heat of lightning close in the punk tanged air. She loved a good storm. Absently her age-spot speckled fingers tugged at the black knob on a fifty year old radio nearby. It no longer worked. But that didn't matter. She could hear the dance hall ditties in her head, a blues number about wearing out a pair of dance shoes. And then one of her favorites came on: "Singin in the Rain"! Grinning, she hummed the words, "I'm happy again, just laughin and singin in the rain--"

Jack smiled over at his wife. Her Alzheimer's had steadily worsened. At night sometimes she wandered the house like a ghost. But when she turned on her old radio and sang, he knew she was happy, in her secret place. Before him, on a TV tray, he had a good hard sausage, a square of fragrant cheese, a sleeve of crackers, a jar of mustard, a bottle of garlic-stuffed olives, a butter knife, and a can of ice cold Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. He set to work, his knife moving with deliberate precision, like a maestro's stick, waving mustard across a cracker, carving out these sweet moments of happiness. In deference to his wife, he had the TV turned down low, watching an Oriole's game.

"Gonna storm--" he said to Violet. "Gonna be a downpour--" He was just as excited as she was about the prospect of the coming storm, even if it meant canceling the rest of the game.

"Why don't you put a couple hickory sticks on the fire?" (At 94 pounds, the woman was

always cold, even in the middle of a drought!)

But there was no fireplace; she was thinking of the cabin in the backwoods of Virginia where she grew up.

All they had in their current home were a couple of temperamental radiators.

Violet's rocker creaked, working steadily, as the old woman sensed the impending downpour, and then suddenly a gust of cool, fresh wind rushed past them, as if the paperboy had just tossed in a newspaper, hot off the presses, ripe with news.

The breeze wafted up the stairs to where Mary Margaret napped in her bedroom. A rare afternoon indulgence. In a half sleep, she caught the storm's scent; it teased her nostrils. But her body tensed, as a thundercloud exploded and jagged fingers of lightning ripped through the darkening sky. Finally, with a woosh, the rain fell. It pattered her window with an intoxicating and soothing rhythm. Then faintly Mary Margaret heard the crackle of a distant radio, followed by her mother's scratchy voice singing on the thing, some old dance tunes. This delighted her, to hear her old mother actually singing on the radio! And that coupled with the monotonously falling rain was enough to placate her dread of the thunder and the lightning. The dance tunes were followed by an operatic number, the likes of which Mary Margaret had never heard. The singing was so beautiful, so exquisite, she lay stunned in her pastel sheets. That phenomenal voice couldn't possibly be her mother. So who was it? Where was this opera coming from? This miraculous music! It swelled in the room, cocooning Mary Margaret in a shell of euphoria so intense she could not move. The opera flourished, opening up like a rare orchid in full bloom, and then it surpassed even that impossible point of beauty, imploding in on itself, and the music reared up, a wave of searing pleasure that buckled through Mary Margaret's chest and ignited into a flame. Tears of ecstasy trickled down her cheeks, as the flame leaped to life. The ribbon of fire danced, pirouetting like a music box ballerina, and then the flame fanned out, mushrooming into a window above her full breasts. Astonished, Mary Margaret peered inside. Swathed in a tangerine glow, as from a fireplace

burning within, the window bared a remarkable resemblance to a Hallmark Christmas card. The cozy room was inhabited by a society of pale-faced men dressed mostly in black suits, apparel like they wore a hundred years ago. Their collars were stiff, above somewhat solemn-looking faces. On long chains, five pointed stars hung around all of their necks. And some wore aprons adorned with suns, moons, pyramids, and other arcane Egyptian symbols. She'd seen her father wear a similar apron for his lodge group. The strange men assembled together, sitting importantly on tall-backed chairs and divans. Before them was a map of the galaxy, riddled with innumerable stars and planets. One man waved his hand above it, and the map sprang to life. It was an intricate hologram, like Mary Margaret observed once on Star Trek. (But how was this even possible so long ago? Who were these men? And what were they doing?) Mary Margaret didn't recognize a single soul.

Suddenly the men began to chant. Garbled and odd. Like listening to a rock and roll record being played backwards. Hadn't many Christian parents warned their children that some of their music might contain hidden, subliminal messages? Evil ones? It chilled her soul. She strained to hear better. But none of their gibberish made any sense. Was it Latin? She recalled bits of the archaic language from school. And did they just say, Praise to the fallen angel, oh hail to, mighty, mighty, Lucifer?!

Outside the storm had come and gone. Some more fresh smelling air wafted across Mary Margaret's body then, and out her open bedroom door. The storm's cool breath seemed to loosen her from her comatose state, like rain melting ice. What was happening to her? Like a drugged mental patient, she lumbered from bed, following the breeze as if it were a Pied Piper, a Messenger, the North Star.

And still the bliss filled her. Where was it coming from? More tears, like forked lightning, streamed down her deeply bewildered face. Passing the mirror above her bureau, she resembled John the Baptist after forty days in the wilderness. Her eyes were wide open. And saturated with wonder, fright, and the incredulity of divine revelation. Like a sleepwalker,

she descended the threadbare stairs, padding softly in her bare feet, not wanting to disturb or frighten her parents. And yet she knew she was awake! Because she could read the Felix-the-Cat clock on the wall when she got to the kitchen. "It is quarter after four-" She said aloud to prove to herself that she *wasn't* sleepwalking. Briefly, a song she heard blaring once from some heavy metal teen's boombox, flitted through her head, "*I'm going down on a craaaa-zzzy train*". Was she? Her hands were upraised like an evangelist's channeling God. Her soft, fat-rimmed chin tilted up a fraction. Her thick body was taut as a tuning fork. And her body hummed as if thousands of bees were nesting inside her, making their sweet honey, which oozed through her veins like a powerful narcotic. Her arms and legs grew heavy. And soon she became frozen in place, like the Tin man in the Wizard of Oz.

Waves of energy flowed through her like she was an antennae to the universe. Peering out a kitchen window, she saw cars gliding by which shone like exotic fish in a lighted aquarium. Some had stripes of phosphorescence, some had hoods or roofs which glittered brilliantly, like liquid mercury. The red trucks and the blue station wagons were incandescent, supernaturally lustrous. Her muscles began to twitch, a little at first and then more violently. With his small back to her, five year old Evan was standing by the refrigerator holding a glass of milk. The white milk in his glass shone like a high-powered battery, white hot, an unquenchable flame.

"Evan-" Mary Margaret called to her boy. And obediently he turned to face his mother. His over-sized brown eyes glistened like wet earth, then deepened to black lakes of obsidian. The two black eyes seemed to swell some, then proceeded to melt together to form one humongous eye in the center of his young forehead. The single eye was black as ink, black as space, stygian, black as a starless night. The grand eye blinked steadily, revealing a magnificent silver lid, phosphorescent. Mary Margaret couldn't bare to look directly at her boy's eye. But through her peripheral vision, she watched small rings of light flare up where his

pupil should be. She couldn't look directly into the black hole that was this eye, because it's vast emptiness terrified her. Her fingers trembled like birds trapped in the air.

"Mommy, what's wrong?"

"Don't move, sweetie-"

The boy remained still, holding his glass up high. It shone like a beacon in the simple kitchen. The boy's one big eye blinked steadily, holding Mary Margaret spellbound. It's iridescent lid caught flashes of light, radiating them like a mirror reflecting the sun.

"Do you *see* it? Do you *feel* it?" she asked the boy.

"What, mother?"

The Fords and Toyotas floating past the open window were like spaceships or radioactive sea creatures, sailing down the street on waves of super-heated air. The ordinary kitchen was still there, the magnets on the refrigerator and the crocheted pot-holders dangling from their hooks. The refrigerator hummed its usual simple song. But Dear God.

"It's okay, Mother-"

The boy led her to a chair. Stiffly she sat. But the euphoria was still flowing through her like a viscous serum. For twenty minutes, Evan held her plump hand, as the bliss steadily weakened, and she stared dazed into space. Then she began to feel sick with fear. Because she now knew that soon the world would be turned upside down and inside out and backward. For a time, Satan would rule. And how would she protect her family? How would she protect her special boy?

When the back door jerked open, it brought the raw scent of fresh paint, Marlboros, and sweat. William was home. Returning from an odd job, he set his paint-flecked thermos and Igloo lunch cooler down on the counter. Seeing his wife's face deluged with tears, he turned to Evan, "What's wrong with your mother?"

"I think she had a bad dream-" Evan said.

